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Tracey Warson:  
Leader, Mom,  
Change Artist





RAYONA SHARPNACK: "LEADERS ARE VISIONARIES."

# YOU ONLY BETTER

BY CHERYL DAHLE

*Whether you are leading a team at work or facing a personal challenge, real change begins with understanding who you are, not what you do*

Rayona Sharpnack has given frank advice to executives in some of the world's most powerful companies, trained thousands of women to become better leaders and founded and managed—and played for—one of the most profitable franchises in professional softball. But the most difficult leadership challenge she ever faced in her own life came last September—when her mother died unexpectedly.

A week after the funeral, Sharpnack returned to her home in Redwood City, CA, and surveyed the unfinished landscaping project she had started with her mother's help. The backyard looked like an open wound, its topsoil razed in preparation for shrubs and stone paths. Fruit trees her mother had picked out were still in giant barrels, waiting to be planted. The project, like her grief, seemed overwhelming. Where would she find the energy to complete it?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIMOTHY ARCHIBALD



"I thought hard about who I wanted to be in that situation," recalls Sharpnack, founder of the Institute for Women's Leadership (IWL), a consultancy for women in business. "I didn't want to 'buck up' and pretend I wasn't hurting. But I also didn't want to be rendered unavailable, indecisive or useless by the pain. I wanted to be strong for my sister and be true to the relationship I'd had with my mother, which was a joyful thing." As she thought about how to strike that balance, she had an idea: What if she were to make the garden a memorial to her mother and turn it into a sanctuary that would celebrate her life?

Six months later, Sharpnack took a visitor on a tour of her backyard, pointing out the flowers she had transplanted from her mother's garden and the waterfall that pays tribute to her mother's love for the sound of tumbling water. She explained how the memorial grew out of her own approach to leadership.

"We have this authoritarian notion of what leadership means, so we relegate it to something that takes place in companies or military units or sports teams. But, fundamentally, leaders are visionaries," Sharpnack says. "They speak for and evoke action on behalf of a compelling future. That vision of the future could be of anything—a closer family relationship, a

violence-free school or a successful company. The scope of leadership can be global, but it doesn't have to be. It is *always* personal because it begins with you and the person you want to become."

That's why it takes more than a shallow add-on-the-skill-sets "makeover" to become a better leader, Sharpnack says. Real change begins with who you are, not what you do. And that means shifting your perspective. What typically stumps women as they move up into leadership, she argues, is not a lack of ability or even a set of tough circumstances. It is our own tendency to interpret our abilities and our circumstances in ways that limit what we *believe* is possible and thus what is possible. The skills for leading are already there, Sharpnack emphasizes. We just don't notice them. Or we talk ourselves out of using them. "There is no uniform 'recipe' for leadership. I help women discover what's been inside them all along," says Sharpnack. "It's you, only better."

Like so many women in leadership positions, Sharpnack didn't come up a traditional ladder in a traditional manner. In addition to doing graduate work in psychology and linguistics, she spent more than ten years teaching junior high students and coaching professional softball. Along the way, she grew fascinated

with the importance of language in shaping success. A professor once gave her a challenge: Teach a seventh grader how to swing a golf club just by asking him questions. That experience proved seminal. "I realized that anytime you want to achieve something, whether it's improving a golf swing or shifting a culture in a company, it all begins with conversation," Sharpnack says. "I could see the role of language in creating new futures. My work has been all about trying to ask questions that allow people to discover that power for themselves."

After testing her ideas when consulting with small and family-owned companies, Sharpnack founded the IWL in Redwood City, CA, in 1991 and quickly became a voice in the innovative ferment of Silicon Valley. Since then, she has introduced her concept of contextual leadership to women at Apple Computer, Compaq, Levi Strauss & Co., Wells Fargo and Hewlett-Packard, among other companies. Her alumni are some of the most impressive and successful women in business today, but, as we learned in talking to two of her students, Sharpnack's strategies work as well in the living room—or in the garden—as they do in the workplace. We asked Sharpnack to talk about how to be a more effective leader.

## LESSON

# Stop Auditioning For a Part You've Already Got

**Susan Trainer**

President, Trainer Communications  
Danville, CA

In the start-up world, nobody goes home ever, let alone at 5:00 p.m. I was convinced that what had allowed me to build my eight-year-old company into a \$4 million business was the fact that I was willing to put in the personal elbow grease. I felt I needed to earn my job as CEO every day. For seven years, my schedule looked like this: I went to work around 8:30 a.m. and never stopped

working until 6:30 p.m. I'd come home and spend several hours with my kids. After they went to bed, I'd be up working until 2:00 a.m. When I had my fifth child, I was on the phone the next day and took just a week off from work. I thought that being *that* available to the company gave me an edge that no one else had.

Rayona talks about the danger of living your life like you're constantly auditioning. I realized that after seven years of being a CEO, I was still trying to prove myself—to my staff, to the venture capitalists I work with, to myself. It was ridiculous. What's more, the strategy that had helped me grow the business to its current level wouldn't work going forward if I insisted on being so hands-on.

I realized I was auditioning to be a mother as well—taking the store-bought cookies and putting them on a real plate for the PTA meeting so they would look

homemade—the whole bit. I mean, am I good enough to be a mother? Well, I'm expecting kid number six next month—how much more qualified could I get?

So I made some changes. I started delegating significant responsibilities to my staff. I don't lead every client meeting anymore. I'm not there every time we pitch a new customer. By sharing responsibility at work, I'm giving my staff more opportunities to grow. And it needed to be that way. We can double the company in size again, but not by my working harder. There are only so many hours in the day.

The benefits on the personal front have also been great. I've been getting eight hours of sleep a night. I took up tennis again, which I had forsaken for years. For the first time, I accepted an offer from my husband to accompany him on a business trip. He was shocked. "Okay," he said, "who are you, and where is my wife?"—CD



## Leading is about being, not doing

In any situation, *who you are being* is more important than what you are doing. Think about a manager who is presenting a project to her team. Imagine that, consciously or not, she frames her thoughts about the team this way: *You're not really the right group of people to carry this off, but I need you to get my annual bonus.* This framework will infuse her being, no

matter how much she tries to inspire her staff with speeches and promises. So who she is being undermines what she is out to accomplish.

The framework of what you believe on a personal level sets the stage for everything else. But *you* control what you believe. What if that same project leader approached her team differently, seeing them as exactly the right group for the task? How would that attitude change what was possible to accomplish? They

would just need her help and support to get the job done. In the same way that individuals have a *way of being*, so do organizations, companies, even families. The collective beliefs about what can or can't be accomplished set the path. If you can change the framework or context (from, for example, *This is a place where people get punished for failure* to *This is a place where it's okay to take risks*), it will make all the difference in your ability to tap into people's talents and strengths.









# Power Is in the Vision, Not in The Control

**Tracey Warson**

Executive Vice President, Wells Fargo  
Novato, CA

I've always felt an intensely personal connection to my work, particularly in my current job, because I helped build this—Wells Fargo's foreign exchange division—from about 100 clients in 1988 to more than 6,000 now, with more than 100 times the revenue. About 150 people report to me.

Rayona helped me see that my sense of ownership, so helpful in building my division, actually limited my ability to move up. I was so busy thinking about the interests of my team that I wasn't focused on companywide issues. Rayona talks about "scaling your perspective": A leader has to see a situation from many levels. If I wanted to someday rise to the senior executive level, I would have to demonstrate my ability to take the welfare of the whole company into account. It's a question of, as Rayona asks, "Who do I want to be?" I need to act based on what I want to become, not on what I am today.

With that in mind, I approached my counterpart who runs the domestic business and proposed that we cross-train a portion of my staff. In effect, I was suggesting that some of my team report to him as well as to me—not, on the surface, an idea that would seem to be in my best interest. But the move made a lot of sense: The customer could have a seamless experience on foreign and domestic business, and the bank could cross-sell to clients. The program has become a much-discussed model inside Wells Fargo for interdivision cooperation, which has definitely increased my credibility and made me more effective—and more powerful—as a leader.

The same insight also helps me in raising my girls, who are 11 and 9. I help them question their own assumptions and think about who they want to be in a given situation. If they tell me about a disagreement with a friend, I usually start by asking them to tell me what kind of person they'd like to be. It gets them to think about shaping their character through conscious choice, not in reaction to what other people say and do.—CD

## Separate facts from conclusions

The first step in shifting your way of being is to get clear on the difference between facts and conclusions. One way to describe yourself is to say you are the sum of all the conclusions you've come to over the course of your life—about who you are, what your role is and what your company—or family—will and won't allow. Most people operate as though these conclusions are facts, unchangeable and definite. But our conclusions, in a given moment or over time, are nothing more than assumptions on which we base our actions.

One woman in my last class received an email from her boss saying that the project she was working on was cancelled. What she reported to me was "They're screwing me over again!" She had instantly cast herself as a victim. Where can she go from there? Aren't there other possible conclusions, ones that would give her more opportunities and choices? What if she viewed the cancellation of her project as an opening to discuss company priorities with her boss or to better understand how to communicate with her? What if she looked at it as a sign that she needed to move on to a different project or company that shared her priorities? Either of these new "conclusions" would give her choices and ways to move forward.

That isn't to say that shifting your conclusions should be an exercise in dumping hot fudge sauce on cat food. It's not about pretending things are great when they aren't. It's about looking for conclusions that steer you away from dark, dead-end tunnels and toward paths that excite and inspire. Your conclusions about "the truth" actually define your reality.

## Listen generously

We are so used to drawing conclusions and mistaking them for facts that we are often unaware of how much we do it. Slow down and start to notice how deeply your assumptions affect the way you interact with others, even how you listen. Most people practice what I call "binary" listening: Do I agree or disagree? Does that idea fit or not fit with what I know? Is it right or wrong? Smart or dumb?

We are so busy unconsciously judging what we hear that we aren't really listening

at all. I try to get my clients to practice what I call "generous" listening. Instead of deciding and dismissing, someone who is listening generously asks, *Where could that statement or idea lead us?*

One story I like to tell is about an energy company that had a problem with its utility wires during the winter. Ice would build up on the lines, weigh them down and eventually break them. Then the company would be in the dangerous situation of having an electrical wire down, in addition to dealing with the expense of sending someone out in a truck to repair it. A team of people from departments across the company met to

## GET OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY

*One of the toughest things to do as a leader is to recognize when you are hampering your own progress, says Rayona Sharpnack, founder of the Institute for Women's Leadership. Here's a list of "beliefs" that are really barriers to success.*

### 1 "I'D APPLY FOR THAT NEW POSITION, BUT I DON'T THINK I WOULD SUCCEED."

Think about it—when do you typically feel confident? After you've done something well. So confidence is not a prerequisite or a requirement for taking on something new; it's an aftermath. Lacking that sureness is a silly reason not to try. Test yourself. Push yourself. You will rise to the occasion.

### 2 "HIS/HER PROBLEM IS THAT ..."

Wait! Before you finish that sentence, ask yourself: *What is the point of this conversation? Am I speaking in the service of something I believe in or want to accomplish?* All conversations are not equal. Some are about creating new possibilities; some are just negative venting. Which kind of conversation do you want to have?

### 3 "I NEED MORE BALANCE IN MY LIFE."

What's wrong here is not the sentiment. It's the assumptions that underlie it, namely, that your personal and professional lives are pitted against each other and that giving more time to one necessitates taking time from the other. What are ways to add to both? One of my solutions: I take long walks with clients so that we are simultaneously working and contributing to our health. Setting yourself free from the tyranny of "either/or" will spur your creativity.—CD

figure out how to solve the problem. During one of the breaks in the brainstorming, a couple of the linemen were sharing stories about encountering bears while they were out in the field scaling poles and fixing lines. One of the people in the session overheard them and suggested that perhaps there was a way to get the bears to climb the poles, which would shake the ice off the lines. Well, someone else chipped in, what if you put honey pots at the tops of the poles? That would lure the bears to climb the poles. Right! Another person suggested having helicopters come and lower the honey

pots down onto the poles. At that point, a woman who had been a triage nurse in Vietnam pointed out that the downdraft from a helicopter's propeller was actually quite powerful. Maybe if you could fly helicopters close enough to the lines, the wind they generated would itself blow the ice off the wires, she suggested.

And that ended up being the solution to the problem. The reason the group discovered that solution was that everyone listened, and no one in the room shot down the initial idea.

Who you are being is shaped to a large extent by how you listen. So start to

notice: How am I listening—to my boss or my colleagues or my children? If the way you listen isn't giving you the kind of power, satisfaction, creativity, results or partnership you want, here's a question to get you started along the path to change. Ask yourself: How can I listen to this person in a *different* way that would allow me to see her as a contributor? ■

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**Cheryl Dahle** is the coauthor of *No Horizon So Far* (DaCapo Press), about the first women to ski across Antarctica. To learn about the Institute for Women's Leadership, go to [www.womensleadership.com](http://www.womensleadership.com).



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